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ABSTRACT

The Galileo Outdoor Adventures Program (GOAPe) addresses the needs of high school students with a student-centered experiential program that is project- and community-based. At the Galileo Academy of Science and Technology, a public school in inner-city San Francisco, GOAPe is a semester-long program and a student club. From the first day of class, students (aged 15 and older) are actively involved in the planning, implementation, and outcomes of a series of projects and experiential activities that combine real-world learning with traditional schooling. The first few weeks are an orientation phase, led by previous participants. Students engage in numerous team-building and personal growth initiatives, begin a daily journal, give formal feedback speeches, evaluate their own transcripts, learn how to document their semester, get trained at the ropes course, and visit possible service sites. After learning the skills needed, students take part in an 11-day wilderness expedition where they are responsible (in teams) for their own daily needs. After the wilderness trip, students spend as much as half their time on leadership and service projects in the community. Other program aspects include training in computer and media technology, career exploration and job-shadowing, and earning credits through a portfolio process. Program funding comes from the school district, grants, donations, and revenues from facilitating a community ropes course. (SV)

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GOAPe — An Urban High School Program Out Beyond the Concrete

Steve Hagler

Across America the issue of public education, and especially inner-city education, is being passionately debated. Schools are being closed, reconstituted, restructured, "magnetized," and privatized — all in the name of the student. Often in our search for a better system we overlook helping our students who live in the here and now and not the near or distant future. The need for innovative programming, progressive curriculum and relevant experience for inner-city students has never been greater. GOAPe (pronounced go ape), the Galileo Outdoor Adventures Program, addresses the needs of high school students with an experiential program that is student-centered and steeped in project- and community-based curriculum.

The hurdles of running an experiential education program within a public school system go far beyond dealing with the behaviors of at-risk students or the trials and tribulations of a standard teaching day. Convincing skeptical teachers, students and administrators is a far greater task. Not to mention grappling with mind-boggling bureaucracies, fundraising and managing what at times seems like a mini non-profit. But that could be the subject of an entirely different paper. Instead, this paper will focus on the structure, rationale and success of GOAPe.

Historical/Background Information

GOAPe began with two teachers (Steve Hagler and Dana Erickson) from Galileo Academy of Science and Technology in San Francisco, California, who were interested in providing inner-city youth with wilderness experiences. GOAPe started with weekend day hikes to local state parks, usually on public transportation. For our novice youth, a "day-pack, lunch, water bottle, comfortable clothes and walking shoes" often translated to a plastic bag, $5.00, a can of Coke, leather jackets, and Air Jordans. By the end of our first year, we actually had students who knew what the aforementioned items meant, and we began to make the leap from day hikes to overnights.

Now in our seventh year, GOAPe has evolved into a self-contained classroom[1] and a student club. Students attend the program five days a week, six hours a day for a semester. Every semester a cadre of students returns to act as mentors and leaders for incoming students.

GOAPe Program Overview

Finding Our Students

Or should we say, How Our Students Find Us? All GOAPe students enter the program voluntarily. Some find us through word of mouth, others on the recommendation of a counselor, a teacher or the Dean's office. Students must be at least 15 years old and have completed (not necessarily passed) at least one year of high school. GOAPe is co-ed and accepts all grade levels.

Program Structure

From the first day of class, students are actively involved in the planning, implementation and outcomes of the various projects and activities that make up the GOAPe curriculum. Through a series of projects and experiential activities, GOAPe students weave their way through a curriculum designed to combine real-world learning with traditional schooling.

GOAPe is loosely based on seven phases. Although they are not truly separate, and any part of one phase may overlap another, they help build a series of common experiences on which to build the semester. From the first moment, GOAPe is designed to give students a say in their education, to push them out of their comfort zones, and to help them interact with each other and the people they meet in a positive fashion.

The GOAPe Semester

Orientation Phase

The first few weeks of the program are dedicated to building a working relationship within the GOAPe classroom. During these early weeks, students walk across the Golden Gate Bridge (the first time for 70% of our students), participate in numerous team building and personal growth initiatives, get a journal (they write in it daily), go to a bookstore (where GOAPe buys them a book to read for their first book report), give formal feedback speeches, look at and evaluate their transcripts, learn how to document their semester, begin work in their math book, get trained at the Ft. Miley ropes course, climb, rappel, and attend orientations at possible service sites. In short, they get an overview of the semester and their role in making it happen.

Fast paced and highly interactive, the Orientation Phase is exciting and designed to leave students thinking "Wow! This is amazing! I can't believe this is school!" Led by GOAPe returnees, who set the culture for the class, these activities get students to view themselves in a different light. Where fear once reigned, now a spark of confidence ignites. This new found belief in oneself becomes the cornerstone of the semester. At the end of this phase, many students say "I didn't think I could do it, but I did."

Wilderness Phase

The wilderness is a wonderful place to get students to interact with each other in very real terms. Leaving behind their friends, families and neighborhoods, GOAPe students can learn to handle frus-

trations, deal with behaviors and accept the consequences of their actions without being influenced by peers, parents or teachers.

During the weeks leading up to the required 11-day wilderness expedition, students learn the skills they need to be comfortable and successful in the back country. The curriculum includes hard skills, such as tying tarp knots and lighting camp stoves, nutrition, meal planning, and layering, and soft skills such as studying group dynamics.

Students, divided into patrols, are responsible for planning, organizing and gathering all the items necessary to make the expedition a success, including soliciting donations. The patrol is also responsible for planning out menus, determining rations, purchasing, sorting, packing, and cooking all food. Although there is teacher oversight, in the end, it is their responsibility to look out for themselves.

Leadership and Service Phase

Upon returning from the wilderness trip, we begin to make the transition to leadership. By now students have survived the trip, trained on the ropes course and have begun to build some confidence in their skills. During the semester, students spend as much as half of their time, sometimes more, outside the walls of the classroom, working on a regular basis with such organizations as the Stewardship program at Presidio National Park, Baykeeper, Fort Miley Adventure Ropes Course, and Linking San Francisco.

As part of their leadership and service projects, GOAPe students have taught marine science and sailing to middle and elementary school students, habitat restoration to middle and high school students, and facilitated ropes course team building and challenge activities to people of all ages. GOAPe students have worked with school principals, homeless youth, deaf and visually impaired children, and corporate development teams. GOAPe empowers students by giving them the tools they need to take control of their learning and to accept responsibility for their choices.

Technology Phase

Many GOAPe students come to the program with little or no exposure to high technology. In response to this lack of opportunity, GOAPe has developed a computer lab that is connected to the Internet. The program brings in local volunteers and experts to help students understand the use of computer and media technology and to tutor them in the ins and outs of the various computer programs. During this phase, students develop computer skills and learn how to set-up web pages. Students also document their class using video and photographs.

Career Phase

Getting youth to explore career possibilities can help them see the value of finishing high school and even attending college. In the Career Phase, GOAPe students explore their futures through career interest surveys, resume writing, guest speakers, and visits to local businesses. This phase culminates when students search out and land a two-week job shadow in a career they are interested in exploring.

Earning Credits

Credits are earned by meeting expectations and standards for each subject matter. Each student, through individual and committee work, has daily and long term goals to accomplish including book reports, oral reports, journal writing, research papers, weekly reflections, and written evaluations. Students meet with the teacher to discuss their academic and social progress and to determine how goals will be met. Credit is given during a final interview in which the student presents a portfolio of his or her work to the instructor. But the ultimate measure of a student's success in GOAPe is not the mark that sits in a gradebook. It's the lessons they take with them.

Funding

One of the most common questions about alternative education programs is "Who pays for all this?" The answer is never simple. In the case of GOAPe, it's a combination of public and private funding. The San Francisco Unified School District pays for salaries, lights, photocopying and other classroom overhead. Other than that, GOAPe is independently funded through grants, equipment donations, personal gifts, and revenues received from facilitating the Ft. Miley Ropes Course.

GOAPe's Impact Lasts

So in the end the question remains "Why GOAPe?" And the answer is.... GOAPe is not a one-shot rafting trip or a two-week summer camp, with little or no follow through. We are inside the school system on a daily basis and are a constant force in our students' lives. We judge our success by the agencies, organizations and individuals who continue to search us out as collaborators, the support of community members through their time and enthusiasm, and the financial support of foundations. But the best measure of our success are the students themselves. As one young man put it, "If it weren't for GOAPe, I don't know where I'd be."

I Many of the ideas and foundations of the GOAPe classroom come from two fabulous mentors: Wayne McDonald who started the Urban Pioneers program over 25 years ago (McAteer High School in San Francisco) and Reno Taini who has run the Jefferson Wilderness Program for over 30 years (Jefferson High School in Daly City, CA). I owe them both a great deal of gratitude for their wisdom and generosity.

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